

A conversation with Sam Keyes on Ridgeland Chamber of Commerce



By Katie Eubanks

Sam Keyes is the 2015 president of the Ridgeland Chamber of Commerce. Keyes is a partner with the Butler Snow law firm. He grew up in Jackson, attended Mississippi State University and the University of Southern Mississippi, and got his law degree from the University of Mississippi. He recently spoke with

Sun staff writer Katie Eubanks about the Ridgeland chamber.

What do you bring to the table as chamber president? What are your strengths?

“That’s a good question. I’m kind of humbled by [being president].

“I love Ridgeland, I live in Ridgeland, I work in Ridgeland, and I like what I see happening. Our business community has a good vision of what needs to be done to make a community vibrant.

“But I enjoy meeting people and getting to know people, and seeing businesses grow and expand.

“Also, before I went into law, my background was in community and regional planning. So I have some sense of community.”

You said you like what you see happening in Ridgeland. Could you elaborate on that?

“There’s an economic development boom or a major growth spurt going on. Look at The Township with all that new construction, and what it has become. Then there’s Jackson Street and the things happening there.

“There are plans with the city and the private sector for the new town

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center [to be located at School Street and Highway 51].

“And it’s happened over a relatively short time period.

“Our chamber theme this year is ‘Ridgeland: Mississippi’s Business Destination.’ ”

Last year’s chamber president, Marc Petro, said the chamber was going to have more networking opportunities. How does that work?

“The whole idea behind networking is to provide an enhanced opportunity to develop relationships and exposure.

“For instance, each month, one of the member businesses hosts Business After Hours. When you do that, business leaders from the whole area come and see what you do. That goes beyond normal advertising.

“We also have our Lunch and Learn series. That allows for not only great networking opportunities, but a chance to learn things that might help you in your business - topics like social media, how to deal with the news media, how to handle the Affordable Care Act.

“And we have social events, which people love coming to, and also provide networking opportunities.

“Last year, part of what Marc did, we started Ridgeland Under the Stars, which is a couples night with a dance and a band and everything.”

Chambers of commerce encourage people to shop locally. What are the deterrents to the “shop local” philosophy, and how does the Ridgeland chamber overcome those?

“We are fortunate in Ridgeland to have such a vibrant and diverse retail market. We have the benefit of most of the major anchor stores, as well as the locally owned boutiques and places you shop for those specialty items.

“I don’t know that it’s that much of a challenge.

“One thing everyone has to deal with is Internet shopping. I don’t have any numbers on that.

“But with the exposure we provide our members, we help remind folks what’s available here. I think most times people want to do something direct and personal.”

Will the chamber have any new programs or events this year?

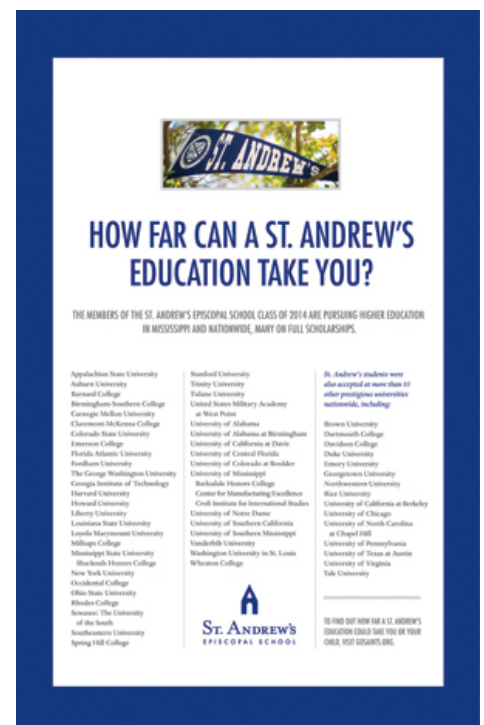
“We’re not going to be making those decisions until our February meeting.

“But I know we want to expand our Lunch and Learn series, which is done in partnership with the Greater Jackson Chamber Partnership. That seems really popular.

“It’s quarterly right now. We might have it more often, but the main thing is to make sure we provide information about topics people are interested in.”

How many members do y’all have right now?

“We have more than 900. We certainly want to grow so we at least retain stability. We do have a pretty good retention rate, but we want to stay on top of it.”



What is the best way to recruit new members?

"I think it's probably like any organization - it's when you hear the existing members talk positively about it.

"If businesses hear that participating in Ridgeland chamber activities has a positive impact, and that folks have fun doing it - that endorsement from existing membership is what helps.

"And the staff does a great job handling any questions from potential members and existing members.

"And we have our diplomat council, the soldiers with their feet on the ground - but all our members are encouraged to have someone serve as their diplomat, a liaison between the chamber and the business community.

"The diplomats attend ribbon cuttings and help out in some form or fashion at all the chamber functions."

Tell me about membership. How much are dues?

"It ranges from \$100 a year for individuals and nonprofits to \$600 for major corporations."

And y'all publish a membership directory, right?

"Yes, we have it online, and we have the hard copy directory. It's organized alphabetically as well as by type of business.

"Chamber members can have a link to their business on the chamber Web site. And they can typically buy advertising flyers to insert in the ChamberGram, our newsletter mailing. Members can also get exposure by sponsoring our golf tournament, awards banquet and other events."

How does the chamber work with the city?

"We participate with ribbon cuttings, and we help out with things like KidFest and the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast. There are a lot of city functions that the chamber will help with or support somehow."

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